

# The Foundation of a New Conservation Movement: Professional Society Positions on Economic Growth

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**T**he American Fisheries Society, American Society of Mammalogists, and Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) are contemplating position statements on the conflict between economic growth and conservation of fish, mammals, and biodiversity, respectively. Similar considerations are bubbling up in the Ecological Society of America, Society for Range Management, and International Society for Ecological Economics. Positions have already been taken by The Wildlife Society, SCB's North America Section, and the US Society for Ecological Economics, complemented by numerous position statements and endorsements from non-professional conservation organizations and individuals.

The proponents of this movement have overcome some high hurdles, and the finish line beckons. What prize awaits, not only for the proponents but also for the conservation community at large? The prize is a foundation of solidarity upon which to build a new, grounded, more socially relevant conservation movement.

This new conservation movement won't dance to the seductive political tune, cantillated from right and left, that "there is no conflict between economic growth and environmental protection." This new movement goes beyond the oxymoronic "smart growth" to a smarter approach of development without growth. This movement won't allow itself to be miscast as a "socialist" agenda. Rather, this movement is about clarifying—for the public, the firm, and the policymaker—the trade-offs society faces between increasing production and consumption of goods and services

and protecting the environment. Clarification will lead to political accountability, policy reform, and a more responsible consumer ethic.

Like all good things, this new conservation movement won't come easy. Taking a position can be a daunting task; fears abound, and sometimes the struggle doesn't seem worth it. The objectives of this article are to uproot unwarranted political fears and provide an overview of how positions on economic growth may be used. This article does *not* address technical matters. Those have been addressed elsewhere and adequately enough, for example, to empower an organization as cautious as The Wildlife Society to identify a "fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation" (Wildlife Society 2003). "Skeptical environmentalists" and others who would yet argue that there is no conflict should address their objections to the burgeoning literature on that conflict.

## Nothing but fear itself

Having engaged the issue of economic growth for over 10 years, I have seen plenty of political fear. Age, experience, and PhD studies in political science helped me overcome my own, so it comes with a penny of empathy, yet a pound of chagrin, to witness the apprehension of professional society leaders in dealing with economic growth. Their leadership on other issues is assured and assuring, but faced with the issue of economic growth, many have frozen, waffled, or retreated. Their fear stems not from personal cowardice, but rather from an urge to protect professional societies from uncharted waters. It is a vague, discomfiting

fear, more like fear of the dark than of any known creature therein.

I witnessed this type of fear confronted (successfully, by and large) by The Wildlife Society's council during the years leading up to its position on economic growth, adopted in 2004. A wary council found it difficult to identify particular dangers, but some members opined that our friends on Capitol Hill would take offense, ruining hard-earned efforts to affect legislation on traditional fronts such as the Farm Bill. The same breed of fear manifests in other venues, reactive and proactive, such as when an agency supervisor censors employees who attempt to inform the public of the environmental perils of economic growth (reactive fear), or when a political appointee disingenuously parrots the "no conflict" rhetoric of his or her political master (proactive fear).

This fear of the dark stems from confusion about the political nature of policy arenas. It is true that a civil servant, a political appointee, or even a professional society can suffer when a powerful politician is provoked. For example, if a government biologist remonstrates publicly about the environmental threats posed by mining, a backlash is likely. Politicians are beholden to corporations because of the campaign financing proffered by the latter. Spurred by the corporations (mining in this case), and operating through political appointees,

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the politician may go after the principled but audacious employee.

The employee will be somewhat protected if a professional society has also taken a stand on the issue. Yet if the industry is powerful enough, and its profits are directly threatened by the professional society's stance, it may attack the society as well. For the politician to participate in retaliation, the threat to industry must be not only direct but substantial, because the votes of an entire organization are prized. This is special interest politics at its most basic. There are other types of public policy scenarios with different dynamics, however, and economic growth is one of them.

Political scientists characterize public policy dynamics by the costs and benefits to the relevant parties. The economic growth policy arena is a classic example of a "diffused-costs, diffused-benefits" policy arena. The costs to industry of professional society position statements on economic growth are too diffused to warrant a response by any particular corporation, much less concerted retaliation. Weyerhaeuser, Monsanto, and Exxon must deal continually with issues of concentrated costs, such as spotted owls, pesticide restrictions, and oil spills. Positions on economic growth won't motivate or mobilize them.

This is not to say there will be utter silence among the corporately funded think tanks. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Cato Institute are among the expected respondents. There will most likely be rhetoric about a dematerialized "information economy," fond references to Julian Simon and Bjørn Lomborg, and accusations of tree hugging and crying wolf on our part. Except within extremely biased circles, however, such rhetoric will fail, because the constituents of professional scientific societies are decidedly not an assemblage of tree huggers who cry wolf.

The closest thing to crying wolf occurs when purported perils in a policy arena are bemoaned by those who have never ventured inside it. If Franklin D. Roosevelt were alive, he could hardly find a

more apt context for his maxim "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

The fact that several professional societies with positions on economic growth are still alive and well should help assuage other professional societies.

### What do we do with positions on economic growth?

Another unwarranted fear is that professional societies will be deemed "advocacy organizations" simply by taking positions on economic growth. The position taken by a professional society is designed to clarify the scientific evidence about an issue relevant to public policy. It may go so far as identifying alternative policy goals (e.g., the steady-state economy) and even policy tools (e.g., fiscal and monetary policies). Clarifying science and identifying policy alternatives are a far cry from advocacy.

Granted, for a professional society position statement to be effective, someone somewhere may have to advocate some policy reform. Many conservation organizations live for such opportunities. Friends of the Earth, for example, is no stranger to advocating, and successfully. But success is never guaranteed. In the early 1970s, Friends of the Earth undertook an educational campaign on the environmental perils of economic growth. It began auspiciously, with coverage in *U.S. News and World Report*, but ultimately the campaign blew away in the political winds. Now imagine if Friends of the Earth, advocacy reputation and all, had also had position statements from the professional natural resource societies in hand. Brent Blackwelder, president of Friends of the Earth then and now, believes it would have made a tremendous difference, and still would today.

Imagine further the effects of such a campaign undertaken by a number of organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, Sierra Club, American Rivers, and many others big and small, national and international in scope. This is how a conservation movement grows to adulthood. However, for a good chance in life, this particular movement must be

borne of the professional society position statement.

The educational campaign is by no means the only use for a position statement. Opportunities abound in political economy. Who would have thought the Supreme Court of the United States would afford us one of the greatest opportunities in history to educate the public and policymakers on the conflict between economic growth and environmental protection? Yet that is precisely what happened in 2005 when the Court based its landmark decision in *Kelo v. New London* on its belief that economic growth is a "public purpose." *Kelo* opened a window of opportunity for an amicus brief by the likes of, for example, the Natural Resources Defense Council, illuminating the public purposes (including environmental protection) eroded by economic growth. However, such a brief would have been dead in the water without the scientific moorings of the professional societies, which were lacking. The brief was never written.

Indeed, a collective position on economic growth by the professional natural resources societies will empower reform in virtually every relevant venue. Letters to editors, university curricula, government agency briefings, congressional testimony, academic symposia, town hall meetings, books, political platforms, political campaigns—the sky is the limit. Ultimately, the United States and the global community will acknowledge the fundamental conflict between economic growth and environmental protection. Only then will policy be formulated accordingly, and only then will we truly have environmental protection for the sake of biodiversity, human health, and posterity's economic security.

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The Wildlife Society. 2003. The Relationship of Economic Growth to Wildlife Conservation. Bethesda (MD): The Wildlife Society. Wildlife Society Technical Review 03-1.

doi:10.1641/B570102

Include this information when citing this material.